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# Montserrat Place and Monsrat neaga: An Example of Impressionistic Autoethnography

Johnathan Skinner

*University of Oxford, [j.skinner@tay.ac.uk](mailto:j.skinner@tay.ac.uk)*

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## Abstract

This is an impressionistic tale from the field. It is a composite of fieldwork days, the dramatic recall of ethnographic work on Montserrat, a British Dependent Territory in the Eastern Caribbean. At the tail-end of my fieldwork research period, I was evacuated from the island as a volcano erupted, eventually destroying almost all of where this piece is set - where the ethnography was practiced. Though this is not salvage ethnography, there is thus an element of reconstruction to this piece, of paradise regained. On Montserrat, neaga is a term with derogatory connotations, but it is also an inclusive term referring to folk. This experimental insight into doing ethnography, autoethnography in this case, is dedicated to Pippa and those who have been killed and displaced by the volcano.

## Keywords

Montserrat, Impressionistic Autoethnography, Narrative, Self

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## Montserrat Place and Mons'rat Neaga: An Example of Impressionistic Autoethnography

Jonathan Skinner

University of Oxford, Oxford, London, UK

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*This is an impressionistic tale from the field. It is a composite of fieldwork days, the dramatic recall of ethnographic work on Montserrat, a British Dependent Territory in the Eastern Caribbean. At the tail-end of my fieldwork research period, I was evacuated from the island as a volcano erupted, eventually destroying almost all of where this piece is set - where the ethnography was practised. Though this is not 'salvage ethnography', there is thus an element of reconstruction to this piece, of 'paradise regained'. On Montserrat, 'neaga' is a term with derogatory connotations, but it is also an inclusive term referring to 'folk'. This experimental insight into 'doing' ethnography, autoethnography in this case, is dedicated to Pippa and those who have been killed and displaced by the volcano. Key words: Montserrat, Impressionistic Autoethnography, Narrative, Self*

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### Preface

The narrative below is an example of impressionistic autoethnography. Its aim is to encourage experimentation in the reporting and writing of qualitative research data. 'Experimental writing' in the social sciences, with its liberal and humanistic origins and aims, has recently been associated with poststructural and postmodern 'deconstructive' movements, with the rise of 'new ethnographic criticism' in disciplines such as anthropology, often marked by the 'Writing Culture School' publications of 1986 (see Clifford, 1986; Marcus & Fischer, 1986) and subsequent publications in similar vein ('after writing culture' [James & Hockey & Dawson, 1997], 'siting culture' [Olwig & Hastrup 1997], 'women writing culture' [Behar & Gordon, 1995]). This 'postcolonial crisis' (Clifford 1988: 8) and post-'Orientalism' literary turn – of blurred boundaries, challenged authorities and cross-examined subjectivities - is held to have presaged a new moment and movement in the social sciences. Experimental writing has always been present in the social sciences, though it has generally (genre-ally) lacked legitimacy as social facts disciplines competed with natural facts disciplines in establishing themselves at the start of the twentieth century. Laura Bohannon's *Return to Laughter* (Bowen, 1954) is widely held to be one of the first genre-crossing monographs as a fictionalised version of her fieldwork in West Africa published under the name of Elizabeth Bowen; according to 'Bowen' (1954: forward), her book is 'fictitious' though the incidents in the book and its ethnographic background are 'of the genre' of her experiences. Prior to this widely-received account, students of the anthropologist Franz Boas, Edward Sapir and Paul Radin had quietly queried the boundary between truth and fiction in their own distinctive ways, the former by writing poetically-informed ethnography and arguing for 'realism in prose fiction' (1917), and the latter through his innovative life history of *Crashing Thunder* (1983[1926]), an American Indian. Whereas these formative publications gained notoriety for departing from the norm, in the last twenty years of qualitative research writing, that norm has been repeatedly challenged and stretched by

subjective, open-ended and conflictual texts as we enter Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) Sixth Moment of qualitative research (following positivist, modernist, blurred, crisis and diversity moments).

Impressionistic autoethnography is a blend of inside-out writing with an Impressionist's representational style (figurative, personalised, fleeting, dramatic and part realist/confessional) (see John Van Maanen, 1988: 101-120). This writing begins with the self, with embedding the self before engaging relationally with the other. The intention is to paint a composite picture based upon a consistency of fieldwork days. These impressionistic autoethnographic pictures are expressly uncertain, partial, and interpretative and seek to be more evocative than accurate and representational (cf. Strathern, 1991; Tyler, 1986; Geertz, 1993). They are as fictitious and of the same genre of experiences as Bowen's *Return to Laughter*, but only in the sense that all textual representations are inexact portrayals of a notional reality. Autoethnography, ethnography written 'auto', ethnography written by oneself, is not just then 'the ethnography of one's own group' or 'autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest' as Reed-Danahay (1997: 2) asserts. Autoethnography is a textual engagement with the ethnographer's self subject and the ethnographic other object, 'forbidden narratives' (Church, 1995) which can also challenge us to think about the process of reading and writing when we include the consciousness of the reader. So long as the autoethnography is internally coherent and externally accessible, it has the potential to foster a 'collaborative journey' (Jones, 2002: 53) by explicitly moving from the inner experience of one person to their outward expression whilst taking the readers inside themselves and out again, thereby fashioning new experiences, insights and interpretations, as well as problematising authorship without alienating the writer from the reader (Mykhalovskiy, 1997). For Coffey (1999: 132), autoethnographic writing goes too far, spilling over from reflexivity into self-indulgence, losing meaningfulness and confidentiality as it gains in personality and vocalness. Similarly, for Wolcott (1999: 194) autoethnographic writing is too experimental, losing critical social and intellectual distance from its subject matter, failing to distinguish between the doing of the ethnography and the experience; it is ethnographic writing 'gone native'. Judged on its own merits rather than by set criteria, assessed relationally and not universally, for its 'characterising traits' (Sparkes, 2002), I would argue that this epistemologically justifiable mode of research writing does not go too far, but does go some way towards overcoming the problem of the self - quite literally self denial - in the social sciences. This was my original intention when I first began my research on Montserrat, an ethnographic inquiry into poetry and the postcolonial on a current British colony, a study which would begin by situating my self before attempting to come to terms with those other selves I was working and interacting with daily as a fellow poet enthusiast. I worked at this for a period of ten months before leaving the island when a volcano on the island began erupting, ill at ease and unwilling to continue such work with my informants who were then suddenly facing other pressing issues. This narrative is written from the field-notes and field-memories of those days spent on Montserrat.

### Narrative

Heat. Hot. It's damn hot. It was so hot when I went to bed last night, and it's hot even now. Another morning to plug and unplug the fan as I walk around my apartment with the sweat glistening down my awkward body. It hits my skin when I disturb the lizards by winching up the shutters. They were built and bred for this place, not me. And the light needles my eyes so I have to frown at everything like a frustrated anthropologist.

But I am frustrated! 7.40 a.m., and Jed's playing a scraping ragga version of 'Redemption Song' down below me. He's screaming the words, macheting a carcass in his yard, pinning the meat to the wall of his little wooden house caught between the new Government Philatelic Bureau (run by the former Chief Minister) and my apartment, an appendage above the Emerald Cafe. (Both myself and the Cafe belong to Pippa Irish further down the street so I can't complain when Jed sets up all their metal chairs outdoors at 6am - more scraping).

Jed's wife must have already heard her Morning Service programme and left for the hospital. The children, Micky and Nicky, have already been punished by their policeman father. Micky hoses himself and finishes dressing in the yard before going to school. He sends the kittens and chickens in all directions, spraying the air whilst singing and wining his hips to himself. Nicky plucks strands of mango from between her teeth and throws them over the galvanise walls. There they land on no-man's land to further the battle between rubbish tip and garden allotment.

The music is loud but when I open the shutters overlooking the road, Neil Diamond's 'America' shakes me even more awake. Doc must be on a day-off. It's his favourite song - it must be to be so loud at eight in the morning. He doesn't like Jed, a fat policeman who doesn't know how to box. Doc likes to play louder music than Jed because Ninja, Doc's dog, was poisoned by Jed. Me, I think it was the AUC students, Americans up on the hill who used to meet Ninja behind the Green Flash when the toilet was occupied. At any rate, Jed likes dogs, he has some tied up with the goats, up above Doc's, at the abandoned hotel. You know, the one that was blasted by the hurricane.

No one minds about the music except for me. Doc's girl Lou-Ann is a bit deaf 'cause Vicki suckled her on dance floors before she took to sitting out on the porch and watching the American doctor students drinking down the road. Vicki keeps the music on all day whilst she makes clothes. That way people know she's in and they can lime on her porch. She daren't touch the stereo without Doc's permission, and he's not going to start speaking to her.

Doc's out by the road in a shell suit and singlet and his goalkeeper's bandanna that stretches down his back to keep off the sun. He's scratching the weeds away from Ninja's memorial pile with his machete, worrying Art's donkey, forcing the ground lizards to scuttle under his house, and throwing karate kicks at his friends driving down the hill to work. An ordinary morning. Nice to see - Doc in the garden and at last watering some of the cacti on the porch, Vicki waving to her friends walking to the market. She's got her hair, she just relaxed, wrapped in a blanket, and she's just sitting with a thin wrap around her torso. She's a butterskin as the Antiguan say, a redskin as they say here. She's a Browne from the north where they all have clear skins, and she always tells me that she's one of the Montserrat Irish. Some say Doc's lucky to live at his girlfriend's - such an attractive, light-skinned woman, especially with him being so black. Interesting that Lou-Ann's just brown. Ridley and Leon, Vicki's teenage sons from elsewhere and another time are more like their father, not that he acknowledges them. Sad really, Doc also has two other kids from another time. There's pictures taped onto the wall of them. They're at school now and he sometimes sees them as they walk up the hill to their grandmother's where they live.

Anyway, Vicki's shouting up to the branches of a huge breadfruit tree arching out above their house. It covers Chef Tony's car park for the Cafe. He says he's poor and that as a white man I should buy him out, though he's got a Mercedes which he parks opposite the Cafe gates, at the foot of Doc's porch, rather than at his customers' car park. Art, his odd-job man, cleans the car everyday. But, in this case, Art's picking breadfruit out of the trees. Sometimes I wake up in the morning when he throws breadfruit onto the galvanise outside

my window. Today, his shoes are at the bottom of the tree and he's heckling the schoolgirls walking up Wapping to town.

"Wha! Gal, leh me teach you wid me tung!"

"Wotcha. 'Come betta dan dat' Kibo, ya raz-boy."

"Aiou. You a one fuking hard gal, fuking hard ya hear. Any more you mothers-cunts like she?"

Banter, but the girl has the better of Art who doesn't like to be reminded of his dreadlocks that were shorn off when he went to jail. He was framed for raping his girlfriend who moved in with some policemen. Maybe they poisoned Doc's dog, saving their bullets whilst on the stray patrol?

Bang - Bang - Bang

The metal door reverberates. It could be anyone and I'm not ready for them yet. Doc could be angry about something from last night? Down the stairs, outside, by the side of the road, a grin and a goatee beard are pointed at me. Art's still barefoot with a pair of trousers tied up at the waist, a torn shirt open to his navel. His hand's on his belly, stroking it in pain. He's sweating and puffing on a fag.

"Ooh. Got any'ing fu me stomach mon? 'E hurt bad bad. Me need somet'ing warm." Art implores me, begging for a drink.

"Wha, but it's only eight o'clock. A wha' kinda t'ing is dis ya?" I practise my dialect and Art cackles through his teeth.

"Aiou, boy, you's Mons'ratian. Jus' some rum an' ice?"

Doc must have told Art about the new bottle of rum we started last night. But 'once in de morning' is 'once every morning' with Art.

"Me got na rum."

"Wha, you finish de rum like dat? Wha' 'bout me, mon? Aiou!". Art leaves for his breadfruit, knowing full well that I won't be shifted so early in the morning. We both prefer a lie to the coarse Sarah.

Doc sees me topless by the door and waves at me with his machete. I have to go across.

"Hey Doc, how you doing?"

"A wha' you say?"

"Huh?"

"A WHA'YOU SAY?"

And what do you say? I try out, "I'm fine. Me chill! You rub up?"

"A'right Jono. The boys say they like las' night. 2-Pac pissed man, pissed. He just sit dere an singing. Technikal choose 'e song. Eh, '*A News Dem A Look*'!"

"Great, tell 'e 'to go and read a newspaper' then!"

We laugh at the joke from last night and I take my leave, feeling self-conscious.

"A'right Jono, me check you later."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." I imitate Doc.

Back upstairs, I continue to prepare myself and work out a rough path for the day. Slow after last night's singing at Doc's. I set straight some fieldnotes from last week, jot down events from late last night and leave for my own wanderings and wonderings around the capital.

"A'right John".

"A'right."

John is busy at the top of the street, leaning against a wall. Everyday John leans and watches down the road. Later on he'll follow the shade to the bottom of the street where it joins the road south. There he'll spend the evening looking up Wapping. He's there

everyday, wearing the same shorts and shirt. He only begged from me the first day he saw me. Thereafter we just say hellos for the first time each day and, should I pass him later in the day, he'll just pretend to be looking in the other direction. He has a war tattoo and a peace tattoo on each forearm, and he lives with his old mother. Though in his forties, his mother tends to his needs. Today, two American tourists, on their way to investigate the Emerald Cafe, or just off-track, are asking him if they've given him enough money.

At the bridge - my favourite view of the island. The bridge divides Wapping from Plymouth. Underneath the bridge runs a large river-bed, a ghaut where goats graze and rubbish is dropped. Up on the right, if you follow the ghaut, there's a green mountain shaped like an old volcano. It was a volcano, and most tourists describe the vegetation on it as 'lush'. That word now makes many Montserratians cringe. The term is appropriate, but when it appears in every description of the island - and now in all the island tourist adverts and on the lips of all the Montserratians abroad who describe the island that they belong to - it becomes worn and clichéd. The grasses are a bit dry and patchy from the unremitting sun, but there's still that emerald tint about them, the rhododendron bushes and tropical trees. 'Emerald' is another of those well-worn words. There are other hills and mountains to the north, but Chances Peak is the highest, the one with the Cable and Wireless mast, and the one everyone associates with the shape of the island.

To the left the ghaut reaches the sea, passing through some broken-up old boats, and you can just see the new jetty for cargo ships and the occasional West Indies Guardship permanently stationed in the Caribbean by the British. In front is the new Plymouth Prison, the old colonial fort. Outside, the prisoners chop wood and line up for manpower services around the island.

On the way into Plymouth centre there is the garage, Texaco - 'the Star of the Eastern Caribbean'. The Wash Bar - 'now serving goatwater, souse and conch'. The stone slabs of the market. The Pleasure Palace Bar 'in action'. The Bird's Nest Bar. Squeakies Supermarket - 'ask if we can do any better'. The Taxi-Memorial Stand and dominoes zone. The Wharf, Jetty and Seamen's Union. Liat - 'Land In Any Tree' - Airlines. The Post Office and Thesman. Wolfe's Diving Shop.

There are passing hellos, nods and papal flicks of the wrist. I disappear up past the new Bank of Montserrat, the Montserrat Chamber of Commerce, Lloyd's Shipping and Insurance, Wall Shipping and Trucking, Piper's Pharmacy, the Heliconia and Tradewinds Real Estate, to get to the Royal Bank of Canada. I have to avoid the taxi drivers who are determined to drive me up to 'the School'. At the bank, the doorman welcomes me to his air-conditioned building. There are about five active counters and two or three closed with "Please try the next wicket" signs. All the cashiers have some words with the customer before getting the money from the one dispenser. The queue's long enough to give me time to look around at the builders, Cable & Wireless personnel, the man who deposits all the Texaco cash throughout the day, some old ladies with brown bags of old notes and a few taxi drivers. Dey say Mons'rat taximen so fas', dey make money 'fore dey learn fu sign fu um.

After my withdrawal, on the way out I pass Doc sitting in the shade of the bank where the buses pick up for the south of the island. He was just sitting with a Carib, just watching the street life. He just stared at me without any recognition. I smiled and waved to him, but people are just like that sometimes. Vicki tells me that he's often like that. Moody. He hasn't spoken to her for two weeks now. But there's no reason. Friends, girls, children come and go, only his poetry stays with him. Dare say I'll be one of them going someday. Teknikal's scared of him and his strength. Only Art and 'Eyes' have known him from school when they used to throw stones at each other. They're all from East, Harris village, 'the wise men of the East' people call themselves from there. Vicki, she's from the city,

never been to some of the villages in the East, up in the Soufriere Hills below Chances Peak. The squats - where Art's built a shack without water and electricity - are too wild for her. No sir, she never go country.

On the way, passing the Evergreen is like running the gauntlet. A large tree - blown over in the hurricane, now growing sideways - marks a junction for cars, a shaded circle for pedestrians, and an arena of observation. Art's washing a car outside the Evergreen Bar, next to the MNT and some of the firemen are sitting on a wall, focusing upon Caribs and country-girls visiting the town. Everyone's gaze follows a white-person and I don't always recognise the faces I know amongst the squatting, drinking men with gold chains, rings, studs and teeth. If I miss someone, they could come after me to know why me dis dem. If I stare too hard or too long then I could feel the wrath of a vocal Rasta.

Above the East Indian Supermarket, the Library's been temporarily located since the hurricane and until the new British development building. There're already fears that no black consciousness books will be bought by Britain - the donor of books and building. What would Cheltenham's Women's Guild be doing with second hand jumble sale copies of Black Power Movement literature?

The front room librarians are flicking their nails and flicking through copies of *Ebony* and *Essence*. There's no one else in the library at the moment - school children will be in the temporary corrugated classrooms which were erected four years ago after hurricane Hugo, nicknamed 'the furnaces from Britain'. This place is often used as the courting house for the older students on special projects, but they only come in after 2pm when school finishes due to the heat again.

I return some Len Deighton - second hand copies donated to the library by expat residents - and some Walcott poetry - Caribbean literature bought by the library. Lorna is engrossed in conversation in the back chambers with Sarah and Amy. She's talking about the Governor, a ceremony ...?

"... services they wanted. This is exactly ..."

"Hullo, Jonathan, h-how you been man?" Amy diplomatically interrupts Lorna.

"Good morning ladies," I address the three librarians.

"T'ought you bin an' gone off island dere." Sarah joins in.

"Wha. Dis boy travels far an' wide through the islands. We were just making plans for the handing over ceremony your friend the Governor insists on." She giggles.

"No friend of mine thank you very much," I rejoin.

Lorna kicks me from her chair by the door, "So is what about those breakfasts on the veranda. La-de-dah, tea and civil service development planning?"

"Yeah, and don't forget the swimming we do in the pool each morning. He floats and I pull him."

"Aiou! Jonathan, what a cheek 'e got on 'im, Sarah," gasps Amy.

"So tell me why your Governor has to have a big ceremony every time he does something, or the Red Cross, or Police Commissioner. Why don't they just do what we do; do the job and get on."

"Lorna, my we look so busy. Is that *Good Housekeeping* there? It's good public relations of course."

"Humpf. Dependency colonialism if you ask me."

"Did I?"

As with Pippa, Doc and others on Montserrat, when we meet, Lorna and I have established a pattern to our verbal relationship. She plays the ignorant informant and casts me as the complicit coloniser. At the end of each week of these exchanges, we then we go to shows together and she insists that the coloniser pays for her - she does drive us though.



We're very close: I helped her with archives and projects and she lets me tape interviews, deliberately contradicting her stories and beliefs that I've come to know from her. This is all part of our relationship with each other, one characterised by affection and exasperation.

As for Amy, I'd love to interview her. A published writer and poet, she organises the Writers' Maroon meetings for Dr. Fergus, she edits all manuscripts with keen eyes and ears and was forced - so she tells me - to buy her British Dependent Territory (BDT) Nationality when Thatcher introduced the new laws. She's always worked on Montserrat, but her family comes from Dominica and Antigua so she lost her British passport along with everyone else in the colonies with the House of Commons Nationality Act 1982. Only she had no automatic right to a new passport. It's probably for this reason that she's so anti-nationalities. She refuses to tell me 'who she is' or 'where she belongs' or 'if she's Montserratian'. "What is this 'Montserratian'? I'm me. I'm not a geography." She goes on (and I agree with her though I don't want to influence her comments by saying so), "but what is it to be British?". Identity's as awkward to identify as ethnicity, and here people seem to be twisted and hijacked by semantic pirates. There's little use in this but for knowing how 'Montserratians' discriminate and reify distinctions. The others in the library are proud 'to be Montserratian' where they were born amongst extensive family networks, where they were taught and learned together, and where they will be buried where their ancestors toiled and died and were killed.

Lorna mentions a Voices concert at the Vue Point Hotel - \$20, the same routines as other concerts, so it's obviously a fund-raiser targeted at the "snowbirds" here for Christmas and the new season. I slip away with a reminder that I'm one of the judges for the school's story-telling competition.

Lunch is a roti - a kind of chicken piece wrapped in a pancake made with soaked peas - at a fast-food by the Evergreen. There are lots of pictures of foods to look at, but none of them are ever offered; pizza, roti, chips, rice, Johnny cakes and chicken are the mainstay. Rounds of courtship continue at the Evergreen with school kids, road workers and office workers all eyeing, judging and rating. It feels like first-year university in the Students Union, but here, with no university and no public funding, there is no 'student' category, except for that closed medical community on the hill.

'Radio' creeps past the outside tables. No one speaks to him but everyone looks. One of the best calypsonians on the island, notorious for his veiled criticisms of society. He stares ahead of himself, sits mumbling in corners and is oblivious to the world he once portrayed and characterised so eloquently. His dreads are a shock, a mane growing out and upwards en masse. The Rasta-ruffians can no longer understand him, but anyone can recall some of his lyrics.

Walking towards the Evergreen is Chedmond Browne on his way home; clear, grey-bearded, shirt, jeans and working boots, carrying copies of his news-sheets rolled up in his hand. A few men stop him and argue. He starts slapping his *Pan-Afrikan Liberator* into his palm, the baton of a riot police officer. They stop talking when I draw near. He greets me with a curt nod, gives me a copy of the paper and waits for the money. I ask for two, one for me and one for Pippa. He doesn't believe that the second copy's for a Montserratian, telling me that it's for my friend the Governor, or for some of the expats to read and burn. I think he's joking as he refuses to sell his copies to any white people on the island. He knows that some of the expats' black friends buy copies on their behalf and that a copy of each edition, along with all local newspapers, is sent back in the diplomatic bags to be read and analysed at the Foreign & Commonwealth West Indies British Dependent Territories Desk. That's why some of the comments are extreme or confusing - they're written not for other Montserratians but to create an impression in the mind of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office analyst who

informs the Minister who informs the Prime Minister who informs the Governor who informs the local Government who informs the Montserrat people and newspaper writers. Thus, an open letter to John Major titled 'The Black Condition of White Colonialism', or 'Governor's policies rely upon dependency' are more than frustrated criticisms, they can be massively calculated long-term strategies pitted against those of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (rather than some short-term recommendations to an incumbent Government).

Swiftly, I ask him a question, "Can I drop by and return some of those books some time?"

He shrugs, "Anytime, you know where I am."

Cheddy seldom sleeps, plays countless games of chess against a computer each night to improve his powers of concentration and reads late unto the morning to improve his mind so that he can teach others about the oppression suffered by 'Afrikans' on Montserrat and around the world. He's the head of the Seamen's Union which the Governor has decided to break. He represents several hundred illiterate workers; that's why he's always out on the streets talking about his news-sheet outside bars, on street corners and at the Evergreen.

"Okay, thanks then." I leave, working out a night when I can listen to his five hour soliloquies without losing or forgetting any of his words. Maybe I can tape him and we can go through the theories and perspectives which he used to broadcast on the radio (until the Governor censored him under an Act of Sedition, one usually used against Germans in times of war)? Not tonight though, there's a Maroon on which I can't miss.

Amy told me back at the library about the meeting tonight, so I'll skip some work on local calypso up at ZJB Radio and go get some exercise.

Down in Wapping, past John, Jed's now silent house, the flock of chickens which live, feed and are killed on the Wapping Road, the car park with the Governor's white de luxe Range Rover and chauffeur - or is this one his wife's? - and the same tape coming from Vicki's house. I wait for the traffic to die down to open my door and climb above the noisy Cafe.

There's been no time for exercise this past week and the weekends are my most busy time when people and friends are not working 'nine to five' at their jobs. I take off up the hill for a brisk run in the afternoon. John follows me with his eyes, confused; Art shouts some encouragement about catching some girls I'm chasing in front of me. I leave behind the fictions and confusions of life and climb the left-side of the road, passing some British road signs, the Hotel which Jed uses, and other derelict house boxes.

I reveal my idiosyncratic body to Montserrat; brown calves, starched thighs, peeling forehead, blinding white shoulders. I glisten past the huge, new Pentecostal Church with three hour services, a bridge with a graffiti name leading to 'This Holy Mount Zion', the sentry at Government House, up to the American University of the Caribbean (AUC) campus - medics in condos around the island dissecting imported cadavers. There I get a few cautious waves from white North Americans who misplace my name but recognise my colour as belonging to some other class cohort - waspishly suffering along with them the waspish disadvantages of affirmative action.

Down the other side of Amersham Estate, past the back of the school, another granite-built windmill resisting the end of slavery, another plantation house, some new houses with goats on the lawns and dogs in the driveways, satellite dishes 4m in circumference. Steep, steep roads above Plymouth and a pale sea. No other islands visible today.

Over-grown car-wrecks litter the sides of roads. They remind me of the artificial reef the Governor built offshore by dumping over 100 cars in a line. Mothers sit with children on their porches as I run down to Kinsale sea shore. A village a mile south of Wapping, named as a reminder of an Irish home the inhabitants once possessed; here too, the site of Fort

Barrington marks the Anglo-Irish troubles and the problems with European integration which are played out along the keen edges of Empire. Niggy's is a jazz bar: Niggy, married to a white man, sings along to backing tapes. Moose's is a sea-food bar and restaurant on a wooden jetty, an evening retreat for tourists and expats and AUC students and businessmen, but not for anthropologists on tight budgets.

Back to Wapping up the southern island road, sea to the left and a beach shelf of black sand. Past the bus shelter which bounds the two areas, the old Yacht Club opposite the Inn; I've arrived at Sugar Bay; the fork to Captain Weekes's and the town docks, and the other to the bottom of Wapping - the Governor's cliff, Zacky's Hangout Bar, a collection of houses receding into the cliff-side, the old Pentecostal Church which used to lock the congregation in, the Oasis outside restaurant, Irish's Funeral Home, White's Pest Control. And then the one-way Wapping road between stone houses; Pippa's long house, the Cafe and apartment, Jed's and the Philatelic Bureau on the left (before the bridge), one of the Weekes's old family homes, now leased to Michelle's (expat) hair salon and the Green Flash, with two North Americans in their twenties - Dan and Jan - with matching his and hers nose-studs, and Abdullah Weekes's new-found mosque above. An empty plot of land, Vicki's house, a small deserted concrete office and Chef's car park.

Tap - Tap. I enter my landlady's house. Polished floors, antler coat-racks, French prints, Sally struggling to lift herself from a wooden bench by the yard window.

"What you make me move for? Why you knock and get me up each time?" She curses me.

"Oops, sorry Sally, I'm just used to knocking."

"I see ... said the blind man."

Sally resettles herself in the gloom and wafts away mosquitoes, real and imaginary.

"Pippa's upstairs, sleeping probably. Would you just look at that kitchen? I try my best but I can't follow after her with my hip the way it is."

"I think I'll just leave her then. Is she okay now after I forgot to put Beau back on the chain?" I hadn't forgotten. 'Pee-Pee' Beau, Pippa's black stray dog, 'a thoroughbred Montserratian dog', needs at least an hour a day off his metre long chain, if only to wash his semi-circle.

"It's a state in the kitchen and you can smell him on the chain outside. Put him in the garage at night and he makes a mess outside my window, leave the garage empty and the Green Flash people make a mess in the gutter and leave their filth everywhere. I don't know."

Last night must have been annoying for the two of them. Pippa sleeps during the day to make up for the noise during the night. Sally maintains the hours she kept as a seamstress - early to bed, working by 6am, resting for breakfast and lunch and mid-afternoon and working into the evening. Late into her eighties, Sally no longer has any clients or apprentices to sew for.

Pippa must have heard me with Sally. She opens her shutters and calls down to me as I leave, giving me five minutes to change and to meet her for one of her periodic spins in the car.

Art, Vicki and Lou-Ann, John and Chef Tony, all talking around Doc's porch, watch me return to my apartment.

I wave to Lou-Ann who doesn't always recognise me. She pokes her tongue out at me and twists her body from side to side.

"A'right, Jonathan," calls Vicki.

Art, faces me and salutes me with a tumbler full of rum and coke.

“Jonathan, white man, times is trouble see, look at dis empty place. When you going to buy it from me?” calls Tony.

“Chef, me got nut’ing, nut one damn t’ing ya hear.” And I disappear behind my door, faster than Lou-Ann can check the road and come across to play.

Ten minutes later I reappear, but this time I am only subjected to inquisitive stares. The gates are open to let the burgundy banger go. I guide Pippa in her exit onto the one-way lane, facing the entrance of the Green Flash. We motor down to the junction, cut across some earthy no-man’s land, bang the exhaust and pull over so that Beau can catch up with us.

“Get off! Get back, I swear ... ‘Pee-Pee’ Beau, me loves you but if you don’t return to the house this instant me tan you hide wid me boot, so help me I will.” Pippa slips into dialect when provoked or when joking. She kicks the dust near the dog. Beau backs off, waving his tail at this attention he’s getting. I hang the exhaust back onto it’s coat-hanger ledge under the tail of the car. We motor off, chased by an excited dog, watched by an inscrutable John.

Pippa hits the gas and we soon leave the dog behind us.

“Jonathan, check fu see dat dog out de way.”

“He’s standing in the middle of the road, panting an’ watching us.”

“Good. He’ll not need to walk then!”

“Since when have you taken him for a walk?”

“Tchups! Watch you’ rent boy, it doubles when it’s overdue.”

It’s a shame I don’t have it with me to throw down on the dashboard.

During all this, we pass familiar sites - the back of the prison, the jetty, War Memorial, Evergreen turning, Ram’s huge supermarket, another Texaco, the place where buses start to drive to the north and the old Anglican church and beach cemetery on the road out of town; past school, the sports grounds, Shell station and industrial complex of Lover’s Lane, the MNT Museum, onto the runway.

“So, where are we going then?” I ask, at a later stage in the proceedings than usual. But, as a friend, companion, gate-keeper, landlady and aunt, I’ve come to accept these things from Pippa, to expect and to let these things happen to me. I must be a much nicer person - for all this acceptance - than before.

“The Montserrat runway. You know why it’s called that?”

I do: for the sake of an ethnographic answer, and for your sake, I could say I don’t, but that would be untrue; Pippa could remember her telling me how the runway got its name when we were last on it; and it doesn’t make the slightest bit of difference what I do or don’t know when it comes to Pippa deciding to explain or show something to me.

“Something to do with Liat suddenly dropping out of the sky, running out of petrol during the ten minute flight from Antigua, or maybe something to do with a motorway development project assigned by the Foreign Office to make Montserrat like Guadeloupe,” I reply cleverly.

Pippa snorts. We swerve. Our speed settles on a jerky 30 mph after the earlier burst.

Pippa wags a finger in the air: “You young t’ing, you t’ink you white people can come and tell us what we want. Us dat live here. On my Montserrat. Baah! Look, look, see dat junction we passed, up to the museum. There’s been some nasty accidents there in my time.”

Is this a *non-sequitur* I’ve come to expect from Pippa? Is she continuing her stream of opinion? Is this a veiled warning to me, to the expatriates? Is there going to be another St. Patrick’s Day rebellion?

We both start laughing. Pippa tells me about some accidents she's been in, how her father always rode a horse around the cotton estates on the island, and that the car needs its exercise in fourth gear, or else serious problems can develop.

"The only straight road on the island. You can let her rip. But why didn't Britain put in any pavements?"

"No idea," I shrug awkwardly in the car - but I'm happy with my interpretation of Pippa's accident descriptions.

"Anywhere else and it wouldn't have been allowed. Standards you see, standards. Britain would not build a road like this, especially if people need to walk along it to get to town. It would be illegal. So, Jonathan, why build it here?"

As white token - representative coloniser - I have no idea. I'm concentrating upon seeing the one legged man who rides his donkey along the road each day, and the field with grazing donkeys which distracted another villager who couldn't control his passions. These were the stories related to me by an expatriate couple who regularly wrote home to their children about life and retirement on Montserrat.

Long after the turning off to Foxes Bay, the road rises to the Cork Hill junction. I've only ever turned left here, to continue on the road to the north of the island. We do that and follow a winding descent into Belham Valley. There's a view of the centre of the island on the right, green hills all covered in thick vegetation of young trees (the old ones were thrown down in the last hurricane). There's a plantation house on the rise of a hill with a vista of the valley and the sea. The Hollander's own Waterworks - one of the last of the estates (2,000 acres) in the Caribbean to retain family control since colonisation of the island in the seventeenth century. It is said that the Hollanders own land from one side of the island to the other and that many of the expat houses are on leased land; Montserrat may be only just over seven by eleven miles, but there are over 100 miles of roads covering only some of the pear-shaped 120 miles of surface area. The family show tourists around the estate, explain the sugar process, serve lunch to the tourists and let them admire the views and location of Air Studios where the Rolling Stones, Sting, Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney and others used to record their albums in splendid isolation, on an island where bodyguards become obsolete; where Midge Ure can visit a bar for a quiet drink with the regulars. Each Montserratian has their super-star story, most of them describing the casualness of relations which they detail to excitable foreign fans.

Above the golf course is the main congregation of expatriate villas and luxury condominiums with pools and verandas, American and Canadian flagpoles, and self-labelled houses: Crowe Hall, Dutcher Studio, ASDIP (A Splendid Day In Paradise), Stern Villa, and a few pseudo-Irish/West Indian names - Killarney, Finnegan's Wake (a writer's residence), Ras Retreat, Pippilo Condo. These last few names don't go down well with the Montserratians, many of whom have equally luxurious mansions but which don't rival the Mars Bar family's summer retreat.

"Jonathan, you na piss wid me? You wid me or you asleep?" I stop gazing around the island and turn and look at Pippa.

I think about cracking the joke from the television, 'no, I'm with the Woolwich', but there are no Building Societies on Montserrat and no such commercial in the people's consciousness.

We turn left at Belham Valley Bridge where the island roads meet. The centre of the western side of Montserrat? The approach to the north? Salem City lies stretching out on the other side of the valley. It grows to incorporate the expat ghetto as well as local areas, Lower and Upper Frith's. The few areas which are mixed are when a wealthy Montserratian moves

to the coastal villas built for expats and the AUC students rent cheap housing in the middle-income belt of houses.

We pass along-side the golf-course on the left and on the right I spy Mrs. Harris's home. Living under a white shadow, Mrs. Harris has a three-room, prefabricated wooden shack planted down next to the golf-course, like an illegally parked trailer-home. She lost everything in the last hurricane.

"Look up dere Jonathan, dis is where an expat sold his house so he didn't have to live next to a black family," Pippa tells me indignantly. An unlikely interpretation of events, but rumours are born this way and are carried through the long grass like the dengue.

At the top of the hill, we pass lots of land barely developed, standing vacant next to villas which have been occupied for years. Here lives the Police Commissioner sent by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, the other Technical Co-operation Officers (TCOs), the seasonal "snowbirds" migrating from Canada to pass their winter. The former Governor's widow, and other past Administrators' descendants all maintain a residence on the island here; they are respected throughout the community, and find it so difficult breaking away from such situations.

The luxurious villas suddenly change into prosperous residences and into cheaper houses. We motor down through Salem conurbation, home to the Killer Bees female cricket champions, past Desert Storm - the roadside bar, and back down into Belham Valley, past Buffonge the dentist/Government Health worker's mansion next to the Hollander's secluded turning, past the up-market restaurant Ziggy's, and back up the hill to Cork Hill. Past Woodsville apartments - 'condos with class', up past the churches - 'think salvation', the 'Keep Montserrat Clean' painting on the road-siding, the Rotary sign - 'Don't Ask Why', and the Montserrat Water Authority billboards - 'It is illegal to make unauthorised connections to water pipes', and - 'It is illegal to fell trees within 30m of a water source'.

"Next time, Jonathan, when you more awake boy, me show you up Isles Bay, those houses are mmsstt," she smacks her lips and performs a slow U-turn across the track. "An' de drug barons. Expats doan like house bigger dan dey!"

Wapping is the same as when we left it, but each time I leave it mammoth changes in my experiences and knowledge of Montserrat occur. I want the neighbours to share this.

We reverse and turn at great speed into the garage.

The dog is back on the chain, but Sally has moved from the bench to the kitchen. She has done Pippa's washing up and is reheating a thick stew - a broth of the sharp, boany goat meat, plantain and pumpkin. The sauces are delicious and it makes a change from tuna pasta or beef hoof or souse (pig's tail). Any thicker and it would almost pass for traditional goatwater.

I ask if there's to be a wedding for all this goatwater.

Sally chuckles and Pippa leaves for TV and solitaire upstairs. I daren't play a quick game of Scrabble with Sally without Pippa: Sally takes so long figuring out her moves that she forgets that it's her turn. Either that, or she can't read the letters and uses the wrong letters which she thinks she sees.

Pippa's started making a habit of eating upstairs at a later time so she doesn't miss the OJ trial updates, or the live Crossfire discussions from Washington on Montserrat Cable. She'll probably use her kitchen for the evening until she's forgotten that she forced Sally to do her washing up. Sally mentions all this to me whilst asking about what I saw and did with her younger sister. She's almost housebound except for some slow wandering up the middle of Wapping road with her walking frame and when Pippa feels like driving her about the island.

"I don't like it. I'm not hanging my washing out for everyone to hear if you know what I mean. This goes no further. But I'm not happy with this constant clearing up behind her. She can manage the stairs, so let her use her own kitchen. But don't come leave everyt'ing down here."

"I know, I'll get the plates. Here, let me help."

Sally continues admonishing Pippa through me and after a few sentences I'm not sure if she's mistaking me for her dear sister. "I don't know. I'm still new to the place. Pippa moved me upstairs to have my floor varnished. She never moved me back. I had to creep me t'ings down, bit by bit."

"Oh dear."

"I never grew up here. One night when I was a young girl I visited my grandparents, up in Dagenham. It was separate from Plymouth then. I fell asleep and spent the night there. I stayed and they looked after me and brought me up. So I've always been a visitor here, you see."

"How many were there in the family at that time?"

"Well, there were nine of us in all. I had five brothers. You know Red from Trinidad ..."

"Oh yes, the one that visited and fought the Germans."

"That's right. And there's Sidney up the hill. You know him."

"He's got the dogs? Drives real slowly."

"Yes siree. We were a big family with our parents, the Estates to manage and the maids looking after us. There was always somebody cooking and somebody washing for the family. There simply had to be. Everyone was out working and in those days it wasn't like now. None of that's left anymore. In those days people weren't scruffy. You couldn't be. Red dressed for work in a suit, starched collar, ties, waistcoat, a proper jacket and hat. Everyone tipped their hats in those days. If school kids didn't they'd get respect beaten into them. None of this cheek nowadays. No sir. Ssttsstt. Look at that Lou-Ann girl: brought up backward like her. Can't speak nor eat. No manners. Damn cheek. Do you want some more?"

"Mmmm. That was lovely. But really, no more. Maybe later? Thanks though." I decline another helping.

"Humpf. Damn neaga food dis. Heard you next door last night. The noise was so bad I went to the bedroom upstairs and came down at three. They'd quietened down then but one awful smell of drink on the road. Saw your light on earlier when I couldn't sleep."

"Sally. I was not at the Flash last night and you didn't hear me. I was over at Doc's, that was why it was so late."

I try my best to dissociate myself from an aspect of Wapping life which plagues the Irish household. I find myself observed at all times; put into groups; interpreted by people; deliberately cross-examined and riled to have my reactions weighed and tested. Diplomatic truth is the only way forward. People know other people all too well, despite miscommunications. Kindly picking me up at the airport on the other side of the island when I first arrived, Pippa went on to pick me apart on the drive to Plymouth: she bargained with me over rent; she refixed prices and tested my determination before accepting my genuine interests, my anthropological and literary studies, my sympathies and concerns with local people. And then Pippa held dinner parties to introduce me to her friends, oriented me around the streets of Plymouth, filled me in on the unofficial histories of the island, the gossip, the cuisine, the class-race-colour divisions; and she refused to be interviewed but insisted on telling me her stories, everyday: about her youth, the coming of the white residents, the end of the cotton days, the labour unions, adult suffrage - the horrific tail-end of

slavery - her work for the West Indian Commission, the racism she experienced during her visits to Canada and Great Britain ('when it was Great'), her love of royalty and British administration ('when it *was* administration'), the all-night picnics on a beach, and all her rosy-coloured memories of an island-life coming to a vigorous close.

I became her irksome son, her secret confidant, her brother in the extended family, her companion, her lodging guest, her very own savant. I brought her all the gossip from the streets; the expat intrigues, *faux pas* and stupidities that were only guessed at by Montserratians, guessing through a veil drawn between public interactions and private personas. And I fell in love with her, a mentor through Montserrat, an impossible subject, a mother, a sister, a critic and a special friend who let me be all my relations with her and gave me others besides.

Sally is full of reminiscences tonight, so I do the dishes and spare ten minutes for some dominoes before the Maroon at half-seven.

Sally continues to talk through me. Swatting at mosquitoes, "if I had only been brought up here, then I wouldn't feel such a stranger." She finishes by smoothing her skirt and examining her domino pieces.

"Why don't you just tell her, speak to her about her mess you have to clear up?" I ask, indignant on her behalf.

"I know. I know. But the Bible says that you should do all that you can to keep the peace of the house."

"Are you at peace?"

"Ttchhaa!"

"Well then. Not doing anything doesn't give the house peace. You live here too." These are old discussions so I feel free to give advice. "How long have you been here then?"

Sally sighs. "I don't know. Forty years I suppose."

Sally shrugs and sits in her wrinkles of skin. Concentrating on this action, she misses my recoil. Forty years she's lived here. I wasn't expecting such an answer. Four years. Six years at most. But forty! I can't comprehend this length of time. She's lived in Wapping almost twice the number of years that I've lived my life, and she still feels that she doesn't belong. If she's a visitor, then where does this put me, or Dan and Jan above the Flash? Jan announces herself as a Montserratian because she was born here, but she's transitory - from Canada. Do you have to lead all your life almost exclusively in one place to be at home? Montserratians move around the island, but they retain family areas: Art moved back to Tuitt's where he grew up; back to where his cousins and brothers and sisters and girlfriends and children all live. His girlfriend and children live with his brother and brother's girlfriend and brother's children. That's belonging. Me, I must be just an inquisitive interloper.

All this races through my head from a chance discussion and complaint about the dishes. I beat Sally at dominoes.

"Lucky neaga-man," mutters Sally.

Feeling flattered by a back-handed jab, I excuse myself, pass a deserted Cafe and porch, return to the apartment, pick up some poetry I've just come across and a poem I've written myself. I leave Wapping for the Library again, leaving Mersal to open the Flash and set the music rolling for her expatriate managers.

From what I remember, the Maroon itself, that night, went on for a few hours. It had finished with one poem from Dr. Fergus. Afterwards, Bonar - who works in airport customs almost alongside Doc - criticised me in public for not interviewing him as a performance poet. I mentioned that last week had been busy for me, what with all the steel pan bands and cultural events going on around the island.



Bonar made the most of this: "Jonathan, you'd be at the War Memorial if there was a pan beating there."

Bonar raised some smiles from his audience and his target: "A sardine pan!"

We departed in laughter, Bonar bent low, his body shaking and his throat cackling at me.

The rest of the evening in Wapping was busy and noisy: that night, Victoria beat Micky around the head with her saucepan; Vicki watched taxis dropping the AUC students off outside the Green Flash, and kept an eye on her Lou-Ann and Chef's Natalie until the restaurant closed at twelve-thirty am. I was kept awake by the students chanting 'Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie' and 'He is a penis, he is a horse's penis, he - is - a - hor-se's - penis' in between refrains from Grease, Queen's Greatest Hits and a mix of Asian-American rave: all favourite imported CD's the students bring down from their dormitory rooms.

The local Montserratians stood at the doorway, watching, looking in on the Americans. On Friday nights the back of the Flash is turned into a barbecue and reggae, limbo and wining, joint. There, tourists, locals, Americans and Rastas can all rub, wine, grind and jam for as long as they like. For those tired of the alien music and dance, the American tracks play at the same volume in the front bar, a doorway away. If there aren't enough students to keep their music running, they can stand in the street outside Sally's bedroom window.

Twenty dined at Tony's till eleven o'clock. By midnight the students, and drunk tourists, dominated the Flash: thirty dancing, drinking and playing dice with some expat residents; forty outside, north of the Bar, facing twenty Montserratians sitting and standing, spectating and encouraging inter-ethnic brawling between Asian-Italian-Jewish Americans. After an exam, the entire AUC cohort stays down on the street till 3am when Pippa finally persuades the police to turn the music down, or for the groups to split between the Yacht club and the Green Flash. If there is no exam, the students are gone by half-twelve and the locals take over. That's what happened last night until the Flash closed at two in the morning and individuals dispersed by about three.

A typical Tuesday for Wapping, Pippa, an anthropologist, the Maroons creative writing group, Vicki, the students, Art and John.

### Postscript

It is for the reader to judge whether or not this is a successful narrative according to their reading of this short story, introduction to impressionistic autoethnography and Montserrat, and/or historical reconstruction of island life lost to the volcano. As impressionistic autoethnography, the writing approach falls into line with the innovative edited exemplars put together by communication studies specialists Bochner and Ellis (1996; 2002). Because of the impresssionistic and autoethnographic approach taken with this piece of qualitative writing, I hope that it will stand as more than just 'salvage ethnography' – which is of value and note because much of the island has been destroyed by a volcano and many of the islanders have left the island.

As a whole, Hertz's (1997) edited collection, *Reflexivity and Voice*, encourages the ethnographer to reflect upon the distinction between reflexivity (relating an experience whilst living it) and voice (presenting the writer's self as well as representing the informants' selves) in terms of the ethics of writing. How much of the self should the writer reveal, for instance? What should be the balance between the voice of the self and the voice of other selves, and what right does the author have to break the confidentiality of a shared experience with informants? Is continued informed consent possible and sufficient? It is not a side-step to

answer these questions by remarking that they are questions for all those who write and communicate through the violent medium of the text, and for all those who have to use their common-sense competencies to negotiate their time working in the field as ethnographers and qualitative researchers. My answer here in this piece was to explain my research interests to all those I worked with and to participate as fully – help-fully - as I could whilst in the field; and to write using pseudonyms and with a modicum of anonymity for those more private figures. The situation of my impressionistic autoethnographic writing, however, is helped by the measured and seemingly innocuous content of my research findings, and the dramatic change/loss of my research location which makes the resonances of its representation with the (local) reader more of an advantage than a disadvantage. Doubtless there are and will be other answers. Finally, as a last reflection, the fact that this narrative had to be re-submitted to include an analytical and more objective Preface and Postscript illustrates the need for more experimental qualitative research writing. Autoethnography, as part of a new genre of qualitative writing, still needs to gain acceptance amongst qualitative researchers, let alone wider social science and ‘unnatural’ science researchers, writers and readers.

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### Author's Note

Jonathan Skinner, MA, PhD, is a social anthropologist, who is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford where he is relating his research on Montserrat to the development induced displacement and resettlement (DIDR) debates. His monograph *Before the Volcano: Reverberations of Identity on Montserrat* will be published by Arawak Publications in May. His other interests are in postmodernism, narrative theory, and dance performance as therapy – ballroom, West Coast Swing and jive in particular. The last topic he hopes to turn into an ethnographic monograph provisionally titled 'MoodSwing'. Dr. Skinner may be contacted at the University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Centre, 21 St. Giles, Oxford, OX1 3LA; Telephone: 08165-777980; E-mail: j.skinner@tay.ac.uk.

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